

## A COMPLETED PUZZLE

*A puzzle was completed by individuals engaging in various combinations of social, professional, caring and helping behavior. The actors were unaware of their involvement in a larger picture; unaware of their connections to each other.*

by Nancy Oliver

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I sat and watched the workers as they engaged in their daily activities. The setting was a busy medical-surgical unit in a large medical complex where I had been conducting a naturalistic study of nurses at work. The study focus was on nurses' days at work and the meaning it had for the nurses as they engaged in their daily activities. Using the methodology of grounded theory, the data were interactively collected and analyzed and a substantive model of nurse behavior was developed. The account of observations presented here was serendipitous and not part of the study data.

My nursing background played an important part in developing my relationships with the nurses. They became accustomed to my presence and admonished me when I was absent. I became an accepted part of the environment in my role of nurse researcher, as I engaged in my ethnographic study of nurses at work.

After twenty-four weeks of participant observation and formal and informal interviewing, the routines had become familiar. I recognized the patterns that emerged as the schedules were acted out and the data collection and analysis continued.

Occasionally I felt like a privileged observer watching a movie in which the characters had little awareness of each other's activities and their related effects. On one such occasion, I had the opportunity to witness a picture develop from a series of seemingly unrelated and uncoordinated activities. This account was not included in the study data. However, it was a profound experience and it is a story that I do not forget.

### Elizabeth's Puzzle

Elizabeth was a 72 year old woman who had experienced a stroke and was unable to speak. She had limited movement of her arms and hands and was unable to participate in her daily care. Her morning routine included being fed, bathed, dressed, placed in a wheelchair and moved to the corridor for "a change in environment." On this particular day she was set up in the busy corridor with an overbed table in front of her. Her nurse placed a picture puzzle, consisting of eight large pieces and a frame, on the table and encouraged Elizabeth to "work on the puzzle." The sturdy cardboard pieces were easy for Elizabeth to hold and the nurse started the puzzle by placing a corner piece

in the frame. She then placed a piece in Elizabeth's hand and encouraged her "... to try to make the puzzle." Elizabeth gave no indication of either understanding the directions or having any interest in the activity. After a short time a housekeeper was passing by and spoke to Elizabeth, acknowledging that a puzzle was in progress. "Elizabeth, you are doing a puzzle... great. Let me help a little," as she picked up a piece and put it in place. Elizabeth received a pat on the shoulder as the housekeeper moved on.

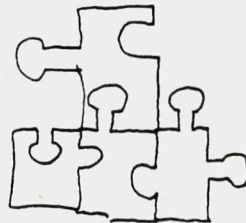
And, she continued to sit with the same piece in her hand, staring ahead.

Elizabeth was familiar to the unit staff and when the ward secretary came back from her coffee break and walked past, she stopped and spoke. "Elizabeth, you are doing a puzzle. What a good thing... I love to do puzzles too." And, she added another piece before continuing on.

Involvement in Elizabeth's puzzle making also included the student nurse who had cared for her on the previous day. "Look how good you are doing today... making this puzzle. Here let me help you with that piece." as she gently moved Elizabeth's hand to fit the piece in place. Before the student left she put another puzzle piece into Elizabeth's hand. And Elizabeth continued to sit in her wheelchair, puzzle piece in hand, staring ahead.

Her primary nurse was pleased to see Elizabeth's progress with the puzzle when she checked on her before going

on her break. She assisted Elizabeth with the piece she was holding and put the remaining piece in her hand with a big grin and a hug. Just then, the social worker was coming down the hall to visit Elizabeth. The nurse stopped long enough to share Elizabeth's accomplishments with the social worker. The social worker was equally impressed by Elizabeth's abilities and helped her with... the last piece of the puzzle!



The report of Elizabeth's progress was shared among staff and documented in records.

When her daughter visited that evening she, too, learned about her mother's activities. Everyone agreed it was an important step in her recovery process.

As I reflect on this scenario I continue to wonder why I feel it is important. Perhaps it is an intuition based on years of nursing experience that tells me that somehow Elizabeth's story is to be shared, so that others will have the opportunity to reflect on the meaning of "the larger picture."

A puzzle was completed by individuals engaging in various combinations of social, professional, caring and helping behavior. The actors were unaware of their involvement in a larger picture; unaware of their connections to each other.

Each individual activity provided Elizabeth with another opportunity to connect with people. These activities and connections gave definition to Elizabeth's morning. To analyze each person's involvement and individual meaning would be reductionist and the holism would be lost. It is the recognition of the larger picture that is important.

### **Different Perceptions of Elizabeth's Story**

The meaning that individuals assign to this event may reflect different philosophical perspectives, educational backgrounds, spiritual beliefs, or life experiences. There are many possible interpretations. I have created several different explanations to illustrate how individuals from different disciplines might respond to the completed puzzle. To consider the consequences of the different interpretations is important.

"Elizabeth completed the puzzle. Soon she will be able to feed herself" predicts her nurse. "Elizabeth was able to complete the puzzle... she has increased fine motor coordination in her hands" explains the physical therapist.

"Let's begin the discharge planning" suggests her physician.

The social worker had already contacted the rehabilitation unit.

Her daughter's response was, "I knew she could do it; she is a very strong lady."

"Her cognitive and psychomotor abilities are coming along. You see, hand and eye



coordination and manual dexterity are skills needed to complete a puzzle; and it is evident that there was interest and motivation to complete this activity," concludes the psychologist.

"For Elizabeth to complete the puzzle is indeed miraculous," says her spiritual leader.

We can never know what this meant to Elizabeth. It may have been meaningless or intensely emotional; humorous or frustrating; boring or entertaining; all or none of the above, or more.

We know that it did occur, and Elizabeth was there.

### Different Responses to the Larger Picture

Explanations about the series of events that led to the completion of a puzzle, the larger picture, may be either simple or complicated. I have, again created a series of possible responses, for consideration.

"An example of an isolated incident that has no grounding in reality."

"A spontaneous and meaningless incident."

"A glimpse of a reality that very few are aware of."

"An act designed by a higher power to give Elizabeth the opportunity to enjoy her morning."

"An opportunity to look beyond what we think we see and to consider larger pictures."

These responses also reflect a variety of perspectives. Another important area that will affect the definition is the context in which the event occurred.

Although Elizabeth was a patient in a hospital, the puzzle was not completed as a result of therapeutic interventions. The activities of the actors involved were social and caring behaviors. When simple activities such as these are connected together, experiences are created... there is a larger picture. □



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